

The Ostrekoff Jewels

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By E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

INTO ONE of the splendid but bare reception rooms of the famous Ostrekoff Palace in Petrograd, its owners made sudden, almost precipitate entrance. A tall man—almost six feet four in his stockings—the Prince was a striking personage, with long black beard streaked with gray, deep-set but fiery black eyes, and thin, finely aquiline nose. His attire was disordered and perplexing. He wore the uniform of a general, but half of his ribbons were torn off, and the flowing cape which hung from his shoulders was merely the ordinary habilitation of a junior cavalry officer. His nostrils were quivering, his expression tense. He was engaged in a paroxysm of strained listening, his head a little on one side. A very human Anglo-American voice broke the silence, and the figure of a tall young man, broad-shouldered and powerful, emerged from the nearer of the great suite of rooms beyond.

"Trouble getting worse, Prince?" he asked anxiously.

The latter nodded, as he lowered his revolver and turned toward his questioner.

"The madmen have won," he announced, with angry bitterness. "The only man who might have saved Russia has preferred to save his own skin. He's in the Baltic by now."

Another voice—there had been people who had called it the most beautiful voice in the world—came from the dim recesses beyond, and Catherine, Princess Ostrekoff, advanced slowly into the room. For a moment, as she stood on the outskirts of obscurity, she seemed like an exquisite piece of tinted statuary. Her husband's grim face relaxed as he saw her.

"They are not hurrying," he confided to Wilfred Haven, the young American. "Why should they? There is a cordon around the city, and they know we cannot escape. They are only staying their hand to be early in the pillaging. They were tearing down the Museum as I passed. Today Russia is paying for the sins of the world."

Catherine Ostrekoff was as brave a woman as any of her Tartar ancestors, but she loved life. There were many things upon her conscience and she wished to live.

"Is there nowhere we could hide?" she asked piteously. "Why should this rabble wish for our blood? The Ostrekoffs have always been the friends of the people."

"Of the peasants—not of this scum," her husband reminded her. "Come and look—you can judge for yourselves."

Even Haven, a young New Yorker of a particular masculine type, gasped as he looked down from the windows.

"Why, they're mad!" he cried. "This isn't a revolution—it's a herd of the devil's children broken loose."

"The poison has been festering for generations and the sewer holes are open at last," the Prince muttered savagely. "They're crazy with vodka and brandy, with license and the lust for blood. Look!"

Two men had met face to face in the middle of the street below. Questions and answer flashed between them, there was a gleam of uplifted steel, and one of the two, with a terrible shriek which reached the ears of the three watchers at the window above the spitting of the guns and the dull sullen roar of human voices, threw up his arms and collapsed in a crumpled heap upon the road. His assailant only paused to withdraw his knife, wipe it on the other's clothes and kick the body out of the way. Then he broke into a fantastic dance in the middle of the



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vention. I looked upon you as a very ordinary sort of person. I find that you have the makings of a magnificent schemer. You have a quality," she went on, as they moved down the stairs, "for which I never gave you credit. Perhaps your profession is a weak one—women are ostracized to the point of ruinous."

"Do you mean that I talk?" he broke in.

"I only surmise. I make no statement—except that I have a feeling that tonight we were deluded and aged upon. From the first, I suspect that little man who was seated at the table near us and who looked at though he had been there all the evening. He had not. I saw him slip up to a store about six o'clock."

Boots Drayton was disturbed and anxious. He had only just presents of a small amount to lift her hand to his lips.

"I have told the men to fetch you a taxi," he said. "Very likely you will meet tomorrow, wherever the meeting place is to be."

But when the evening which he had in his mind should have taken place, Boots Drayton went not to meet. He was lying in his back in the casualty ward of a great London hospital, and even at the inquest, which was held in due course a few days later, there was no evidence produced as to how he came by the forehead bullet through the brain which had ended his life.

THE OSTERKOPF JEWELS! There they lay, in wild profusion, spread out upon the library table of Wilfred Haven's house, in Grosvenor Square, display "to the human eye for the first time since that young man had buckled the chains round his body and locked the satchel attached to his wrist. They had fallen like a flowing cascade on to the table—jewels of all shapes and sizes and colors, from the flaming scaraboid ruby of the third-grown emerald to the flawless, scintillating white fire of a diamond.

In the background—a grim suggestion of the dangers with which their very existence was threatened—stood two of Felix Drayton's men, alert and watchful. Farther away still, Felix Drayton himself watched and wondered, although he never had any idea of what might take place.

There was not a person in the room who could look down upon that table's glittering burden unmoved. The silent drama of the display seemed to have fired even the blood of old Colonel Osterkopff, who stood glaring at the jewels with unseeing hands, muttering to himself. Eliseveta was clapping her hands to her face, her brilliant eyes filled with a sort of madness. The joy of the jewels seemed to have intoxicated her.

"Tell me again," she begged, "what happened? How did it come about that they were returned to you?"

"Ask Mr. Drayton," Haven replied. "He knows as much about it as I do."

"And that is not very much," Felix Drayton put in. "They were returned to my house at 11, outside this morning in an iron coffer. The man who brought it was with three, and two of his clerks. I signed the receipt—sent for some of my men and took it from around here."

"But I want to know who stole them," Eliseveta demanded, passionately. "How do we know that they are all here? There may be some missing."

"None are," an unexpected voice from the doorway declared. "Two are dead, I told them because I had to. One must live."

Anna Katselina stood there, with Silvio's leaning upon her arm.

"I told you not to be nervous," she said. "I told them because I thought that you might want to see this little company."

"I have repeated of my indifference you see," she continued, pointing to the table. "I venture to you your jewels, Wilfred. Your trust touches here and now. It has been yours all the adventure you want. I should thank, for the rest of your life."

The newsmen meant nothing to Eliseveta, except that she realized this now, he girl who had shared Haven's precious fortune and of whom from the first she had been violently jealous.

"So this was the mysterious thief who came," "Well, that is all over now. You will not have to part with your money, after all, Wilfred. Let us put them back into the iron box. Afterwards, will you

come to the bank with Colonel Osterkopff and me and my daughter? Your trust will be over then. We must not let a great many of these because we have not any money, but I shall have some made up. We will choose together."

She leaned toward the table but Anna, who had been busy establishing Rakoff in a chair, turned around.

"Not quite so fast, please," she begged. "It is true, Wilfred," she added, turning to him, "that your trust is over. You have brought these jewels, through many dangers, to Princess Eliseveta. Osterkopff from her father had mother. That is so, is it not?"

"I certainly is," Haven asserted. "Trust or no trust, I'm mighty glad to get rid of them. Thank them, Eliseveta, and take them round to the bank."

Anna Katselina laughed softly. She laid her hand affectionately upon his shoulder.

"I am sure, I think would be a very good place," she said, "but first of all, you must let me thank you. I know better than any one what you have been through in order to keep your trust."

"What are you talking about?" Eliseveta interrupted, with a sudden bewildered fear shining in her eyes.

"I am trying to thank Mr. Haven," Anna Katselina replied, "for having brought me the jewels from my father and mother. I am the Princess Eliseveta Osterkopff. Who are you?"

There was an astonished and spellbound silence, lasting only the sound of Madame Osterkopff's veil in the background. No one in the room had ever completely attended them Haven.

If you want to know your history," Anna added, turning not unkindly to the girl by her side, "ask Colonel and Madame Osterkopff."

Colonel Osterkopff had been born a gentleman and served his life as a soldier. His wife's people were changing, his eyes, in which had always shined the shadow of some fear, were closed now in a sort of cowardly horror. He spoke at length with a sob in his throat.

"The child is your sister," he muttered. "She has a right to some thing."

"The child, as you call her, has had a great deal," Anna reminded him gravely. "As Eliseveta is her sixth name and my first—a comforting count of giving the same name to a young child of the same family—I shall now call her Vera, which is her first name, and as it is no longer necessary for me to conceal my identity."

"It is by the name of Eliseveta Osterkopff that I desire to know Vera, you had a very large sum of money settled upon you, some of which I am afraid your guardians have misapplied. They have lived too near the gambling centers of the world."

The eldest walk into a chair.

"We had £100,000," he confessed. "Some of that we have spent on Vera, the rest we stole—we must call it that."

"We had to live," Madame Osterkopff murmured. "One hundred thousand pounds does not last for ever. It was not we who came to beg the agent of this Mr. Felix Drayton found us out. There was a great fortune, he said, secured from Petersburg for Eliseveta Osterkopff. Vera's name was the Eliseveta—why should not the fortune have been for her?"

"You need have no fear," Eliseveta assured their sister. "I will tell you now, if you like, what the fate of this great fortune is to be."

"They were all looking at me table, at the background of the jewels, strange flashing pieces of brilliance that rested so much."

"I have received an offer of £250,000 for the jewels," Eliseveta continued. "From a syndicate which has been formed in this dangerous. The half a million I shall divide between Vera here and myself, and the remainder goes into the hands of my friend, Ivan Rakoff, to be delivered by him to the name of Russian princess."

There was a universal murmur of amazement.

"Anna, I thank Eliseveta, does not need the money, anyway," Wilfred Haven declared. "She will have plenty, if—," he added, with a little grin—"I can ever screw up sufficient change to carry a prince."

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